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ABSTRACT

Libraries interested in using television to expand their services to the community should become familiar with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) guidelines that require cable television operators to provide an experimental public access channel. Such libraries should link with public agencies and educational institutions to: (1) organize the community to be receptive to cable television; (2) acquire equipment and resources; and (3) obtain from public officials a firm statement supporting the use of the public access channel. This text is the transcript of the introductory speech at a conference on cable television and public libraries. (EMH)

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CATV AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES

I want to shape your expectations as to what I thought we might do together today. We are here to discuss a subset of cable TV issues, because, in their entirety, cable related issues can be endless. So let us concentrate on a subset which relates to libraries; at this point in time, it is my impression that the issue of access, or experimental channels, is of most import to us. The corrolary mass, or morass, of the current regulatory framework is also something that we may want to discuss today, without losing the main theme from our sight.

Then, given the current regulatory framework and current availability of access channels, I would like to examine with you the reasons why we should be interested. We could do this by answering the question "Why bother?". It is not a rhetorical question, I assure you; I have heard it time and time again, so probably some precedents familiarizing us with the ways other people have approached this would help us in trying to answer the question for ourselves, today.

Then I would like to outline some of the steps that can be taken in preparation for cable involvement. There is no reason why a given library should jump into this outright; there is a continuum, you see, along which each library could determine to what extent their cable involvement would be most productive at any point in time. In making such determination the library's overall resources, priorities, and particularly the personnel readiness, and equipment base play an obvious part. So the resulting carefully made choice would reflect how a given library views the ratio of effort/pay off in their preferred level of video involvement.

I think the best way to make this relevant here and most useful to you, is to start a discussion which is heavily localized, with the help with Mr. Speed, who is aware of local developments and problems. There is a certain amount of "history" to the interface between cable and libraries in the Los Angeles area, which Mr. Speed is well versed in as a result of his position at the library and also his early interest in video and cable TV.

So, I mentioned that we shall busy ourselves with the regulatory framework that has brought forth the experimental channels and the issues of access. So let us start there --

Cable operations are generally subject to three regulatory levels - federal, state and local; in the state of California there is no state level so here we have to keep in mind federal regulations and the local level. Federal regulations coming through the FCC are very mercurial. You can almost count on some new regulation appearing every so many months and keeping up can be somewhat frustrating. However, recently a number of publications has come to your aid, as you can see in the bibliography we have made available for you. Some of them, e.g. ACCESS, do a pretty good job of keeping you up to date regarding regulatory "movements", so that together with local newsletters, you could be well aware of what is going on. Also, CABLE LIBRARIES is another publication that tries to isolate what is important to librarians.

The access issues have been relatively stable, and I must immediately put a caveat to my own statement here, because there may be some change soon. The original FCC statement (1972) regarding access has recently been under fire, there is a number of arguments and criticisms leveled; but as of today, no amendments have been yet officially adopted.

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The intricate regulatory framework devised by the FCC has been probably clearest where the access channels are concerned. Cable systems in the top 100 hundred markets were supposed, for a period of 5 years, to set aside three access channels for experimental use. This was in 1972, so that the "experimental" period brings us to 1977. This experimental period of time was to be used to see how these channels are used, to what extent, by whom, etc. so that at the end it may be decided whether these channels should be retained, and for what purposes. In brief then, the desirability and usefulness of these access channels was to be determined on the basis of their use during this period of time. What I am referring to here is paragraph 76.251 of the FCC's "Report and Order": "each system shall maintain at least one specially designated, noncommercial public access channel available on a first-come, non-discriminatory basis ... and have available for public use at least minimal equipment and facilities necessary for production of programming for such a channel". Now, I want to repeat that this one, the public access channel must be available at all times, and the "minimal facilities, equipment" mentioned above are not specified as to format, or color/B/W, etc. so you see, the interpretation of what "minimal facility" would mean must be done on the local level. Also, imagine you are set to go, and want to produce something. The FCC proposes that production time free of charge to users should not exceed 5 minutes; when it does exceed five minutes, the cost will be assessed according to the goal of affording the public low-cost means of TV access. So here we encounter another spot in need for further interpretation.

Question from audience: When we say 5 minutes, that is 5 minutes per what - per use, per month, per individual? Or is it a 5 min. program?

Answer: It indicates a five minute program...

Q-n: So if I wanted to cut my statement to 5 min. segments, then each segment production would be free of charge...

A: Yes, and it may be necessary for you to go on different days, for instance.

Let us emphasize that the public access channel is the only one where the cable operator is supposed to provide you with something. The other two channels, for local government uses and for educational uses, are just available as channel capacity, there is no burden on the operator to provide any further facility. Also, these channels are available free for the first five years after the basic trunk-line's completion. So conceivably if a system was started after 1972, then counting five years from trunk line completion would take you to a date beyond 1977; but this is very debatable now. I would like to discuss some recent suggestions and proposals for access rule changes with those of you who are interested, later on today... When a system has satisified the access requirements, it can offer other portions of its bandwith, including unused portions of the access channels, for lease. This means that anyone, with a priority given to part-time users, can go, pay a set fee, and use the channel for whatever they want.

The cable operator may not exerci e control over program content on the above channels. However, the FCC prohibits the presentation of a/ advertizement of commercial products and services; this includes messages on behalf of political candidates.
b/ lottery information, and c/ obscene or indecent material.
Also, the CATV operator must keep a complete record of those requesting access time and keep it for 2 years, open to public inspection. So should some argument arise about a particular program, the log would help in locating the parties involved...

It is really a very good idea beacuse it fosters responsible use and also protects the operator.

I want to return to access channels availability and their relationship to franchise duration. This may be important when a franchise expires, which by the way is the case here in your area - the franchise of Theta Cable Corporation in L.A. expires at the end of this year. The FCC regulations state that " systems franchised prior to March 31, 1972 must fully comply with access regulations within five years, by 1977, or by the renewal date of their present franchise or when the system expands, whichever comes first". Now this has been a main point of contention, since many cable operators were and are unhappy with the extra burden, just as in the case of the old local origination requirement, which was dropped recently.

There are a few FCC comments that have a place here. The reason why they open the access channels is to bring new outlets for local expression, promote program diversity, educational and informational services. After the five years developmental period the FCC will decide whether to continue this arrangement. So you see the present and near future use of these channels has an awful lot to do with the fate of the channels later on. Let us face it, if the channels are just standing there, if the capability is not utilized, if people are just happy knowing that access is available but do nothing about it, or with it, there is no reason why the cable operators should not go ahead and use them for something else... Otherwise it would be a waste of channel capacity... which is probably what the FCC had in mind while setting up the developmental limits.

Finally, it is emphasized that community programs of all kinds should not be expected to address mass audiences or be slick presentations requiring an elaborate equipment base. So the use of inexpensive, ½ inch, or other low cost video equipment should be encouraged, despite the fact that it does not meet normal broadcast standards. I want to emphasize this, because very often in the field of librarianship people who are interested and want to do something, end up being just plain intimidated...we are used to slick productions, we are spoiled ... so someone looks at some program and says, my god, now I have to spend years of my life in order to learn how to do one of those...So remember, that the slickness is not the point... there is a definite place for ½ inch, black and white material. It would be unreasonable to expect that amateurs either will or should try to match broadcast quality. Rather, the content, informational value is what is important. So we are not talking about competing with a network channel, we are talking about the best people can do.

Now, what is the connection between all that and libraries ...? If you look at what libraries do, you would realize that libraries functionally straddle all the access categories we have spoken about. When thinking of the public access channel, remember that libraries have always provided meeting space and service to community based groups with special interests, and scheduled a variety of events. Educational access reminds one the libraries' function as centers of continuing education for all age groups, all educational levels, disseminating educational materials on a widely diffused basis. Finally, on the municipal level, libraries can logically function as the local information center, and this provides the linkage to access for government ... Unlike municipal buildings, or schools, most libraries are open in the evening for the entire community.

Thus, it seems that libraries could develop valuable services geared to priority information needs in their area. Accordingly, in 1973 the Council of the ALA at the Midwinter meeting in Washington D.C., recognized that libraries have the responsibility to educate local residents and officials on the nature and potential of cable, the opportunities to make it work locally in the public interest. The ALA described CATV as a "medium of localized information"..

What CATV could mean to libraries, then, is expansion, and new options to explore for serving the community, reaching the less print oriented strata and less mobile pupulation of the community. Also, it it offers an opportunity for new professional expertise to librarians who are so inclined.

At the same time, without some effort commited to integrating available facilities,personnel, equipment, etc., libraries, for all their versatility will be unable to develop good CATV services. Although some libraries are well versed in audio-visual services such as records, films, microfilm, cassettes... most libraries are hardly equipped and staffed to handle video or to effectively use cable. So it seems to me that well organized, cooperative work, together with some ingenuity, will be necessary to begin the groundwork in most places. Cooperative work in the community, coordination with local governmental agencies and local cable operators is needed, for very little can be accomplished without mutual good will. I will return to this point in a minute.

Very often the problems encountered by groups who want to promote access channels are of several kinds, breeding frustration most and enthousiasm least, if not anticipated ahead of time. You have to realize that local government authorities need the aditional revenues which could come through the percentage paid them by a private cable franchisee. It is very difficult to fairly assess the complexity of decisions that local government has to go through in choosing who the franchisee entering the community should be, and the issue of revenues does come in the picture. The cable operators and their equipment suppliers are interested in the profit end of the enterprise, because without profit they cannot expand their system and provide better services. Meanwhile the general public remains interested in conventional TV, unaware that some of its long-range interests may be at stake in the agreements the above two groups are apt to make. This is particularly true in an area like yours, where commercial TV offers a fair amount. So you hear questions like " Well, what else is there, we have plenty, we have a good picture quality",etc.etc. So it is hard to figure out immediately what else can be offered, or should something else be offered...Essentially it would be a mistake, then , to expect that people would be immediately receptive to suggestions regarding the potential of access channels.

As mentioned before this is particularly true in developed urban areas like yours. If we by-pass judiciously the issues of who likes what content, level of programming, etc. - these are matters of taste - then we see that the technical quality of programs and the diversity are already there. So careful thought to what should be added through cable access is even more important. Local matters, events, what is going on here and now, the type of things that would not be available through commercial TV (nor should be expected) is what must come. This is then, a possible lacuna that access programming could fill up, after careful planning and consideration of the community make up.

At this point I would like to quote Margaret Cleland, formerly with the Connecticut State Library and current editor of Cablelibraries. In her opinion, "libraries are well suited to the cable advocacy, as long as the advocacy is for public use of cable and not for some freebies for libraries alone."

To me, the implicit message here is a call for cooperation. While librarians may take the initiative, cooperation would help spread the work and responsibilities so that the undertaking would not be particularly burdensome for any one group. Thus, it is important to establish connection with institutions of higher education which have A/V departments, equipments or technical personnel and are production inclined. For example, the existence of quality material ready for use has come to my attention only this week. I am refering to an announcement in the ETV newsletter about some college produced video programs for Northern California libraries.

This is the result of the "Telebrary" project, jointly carried out by Northern California libraries and community colleges. Informational material is put on videocassettes for viewing in 16 libraries. Topics are directed to the interests of senior citizens, women, the handicapped, special subjects for places without local post-secondary education, etc. The project began in 1974 at Cosumnes River College, Sacramento, Cal., with funds from Title I of the 1965 Higher Education Act. Participants include the California Postsecondary Education Commission, a constellation of community colleges, and the Mountain Valley Library System. How about that!

Also, educational institutions or volunteers can hav a hand in helping individuals and groups to familiarize themselves with the rudiments of programming in preparation for access use. Two examples in the area where I work, Upstate New York, come to mind. One is the high school program in Liverpool, N.Y., directed by Mr. Korta, whose background is in engineering. There, video production is a part of the curriculum, students collectively produce programs dealing with youth sports, cultural events, meetings, all of which are stored in the collection after some quality check. If a game took place in the afternoon, they deliver the tape to the local cable station often by bycicle, so that families can see the program in the evening. The other example is the high school Cable Channel 2 in North Syracuse, directed by Mr. Harry Cunningham, whose background is in commercial TV programming. There you have a cooperative arrangement between the local cable operator and the high school, whereby both parties are happy - the cable operator has designated channel 2 for their exclusive use, while the high school students provide programming which enhances the cable system's image in the community. In both high schools you would find very decent studio facilities assembled painstakingly over a number of years, acquiring old equipment wherever possible, exchanging items with university departments, other schools, libraries, friends, etc. Now the most important by-product of these projects is the set of skills that students obtain prior to graduation and also the awareness they create in their own community, an acceptance of what can be done and enjoyed with simple black and white programming. In addition, this means that there are potential volunteers for you among these kids, helping others acquire similar skills.

Further, there are many volunteer agencies which render service s to the community, and all of them are prospective access users. These may vary from the Retired Persons Association to the local Zoo Action Program. While it is very hard to get air time on over the air TV (aside from PSA's), using access channels to publicize the good things each organization does. Actually, people often do not even know that some local organizations exist, let along what they do!...

In each case the important principle in cooperative use is that each group make their own programming decisions, write their own scripts and operate the equipment themselves, or with help they have located. But getting the courage and skill to do so takes time and effort.

In brief, what I am saying is this:

a/ There is a need for a <u>facilitator</u>, an individual or a group, preferably backed by a local professional organization, which could be the library system. For example, a nucleus of interested librarians in Connecticut formed the so called Connecticut Libraries Advisory Group for Cable Television, chaired by Marcella Finan, public librarian in Bristol. These 30 people around the state expanded their own knowledge of cable through reading and associating with others. Later on they developed the first proposals for library use of cable in Connecticut, and negotiated with government level authorities in state-wide planning.

b/ There is a need for <u>cooperation</u> and pooling of resources. Some plan, a blueprint of activities must be drawn, relating to three issues: technical knowledge, hands-on experience and programming which answers some continuing communication needs, in order to obtain a solid local base.

c/ Consultations with local officialdom and with cable industry people in the area. An athmosphere of good will and well defined mutual expectations is imperative.

Let us now outline various preparatory activities preceding cable use, and some activities during use. This is based on an integration of precedents in library/video experiences and points to different degrees of involvement chosen by various library systems.

In all cases, however, there are constant factors -- some limiting, some helpful. The limitations are usually any other pressing tasks of service at hand; lack of financial support for video activities; lack of operative cable system in the vicinity. The helpful ones are a cooperative CATV operator in the vicinity; the existence of some video experience in the area among groups accessible to you.

One level of preparatory work is organizing the community for cable. This rather general stage of affairs can take several forms:
a/ providing information/education on cable.
b/ fostering interaction between local video oriented groups, the cable operator and local civic and government personnel, to the extent to which all or some of these "components" are present in your locality.
c/ workshops under library and university auspices, directed at municipal officials, librarians, youth, community activists, etc. Such workshops need not limit themselves to discussion, but may include some hands-on experience, site visits, etc.

Another level of involvement includes:
a/ equipment acquisition and software for library use. Material and equipment may be integrated with other holdings, or a special media desk could be put together.
b/ audio-visual in-service training for librarians and for public relations purposes.
c/ taping on-going events and making them available for in-library viewing. Now this does not require special scripting, fancy production or staging and preparation. All that is needed is a person with equipment present at the site of the event. This way, a bank of programs could be created gradually for later use in cable casting.

A further stage of activities would be a policy statement adopted by the library board, spelling out the library's role vis-a-vis video/cable. For example, here is the letter which the Director of the Memphis and Shelby County Public Library and Information Center sent to the City's Cable Consultant:" Our first priority is that of being the key agency to assist people in utilizing the public access channel. Such a service is in line with the Library's information role in the community and it is in keeping with out policy of neutrality on local issues and of presenting all sides of controversial issues.... We propose to run on the public access channel simple instruction on how to get a video presentation made with the help of the Library (perhaps once a week).... We also propose to hold clinics for making video programs..." This fine example from Tennessee, written on Feb.23, 1973, goes on to outline further specific programs, and finally suggests that the Library be the depository of video-recodrings of area events of import over the years.

A policy statement calls for familiarization with the local state of affairs in cable operations. This may mean contact with mayor or City attorney to determine the status, if any, of the ordinance/franchise procedure. If an ordinance has been written or a franchise issued, secure copies from the appropriate municipal office. Check to see if the provisions listed would accomodate what you have in mind access-wise. If an ordinance

or franchise has not been written or awarded, determine who is to be involved and what the time table is. Bear in mind that the authorities involved may be varied according to the location (PUC, city council, city subcommittee) and the timetable may even be non-existent. Anyway, alert local educational personnel, the teacher's association, churches, service clubs, civic and social groups, cultural associations or institutions (museums, civic center?), and branch libraries. A broad based and informed local group can provide important inputs to the local ordinance when the time comes. Contact members of the city council, or the mayor's office, city manager, city attorney, etc. A conference to announce and distribute a statement of position could be held, with the cooperation of the local media.

If an ordinance has been approved but the franchise not yet awarded, you may have only a few days to act. Seek an amendment of the ordinance, if necessary. All this also counts in cases where a franchise expires and is about to be renewed.

In the case of San Francisco, library people worked this out as follows. A task force on cable formed, library staff educated themselves about cable and met for discussions. They then drafted a statement and circulated it to the library administration and top staff for reactions. Rewritten several times, the statement was presented to the Board of the S.F. Library, which adopted it as official policy in Feb. 1972. The library's internal policy was paralleled by activities in the community : as a result a CATV task force was formed in coalition with community groups. The City's Government was contacted next...To make the long story short, the young librarian who started it all served on the Mayor's CATV Committee as sole representative for all city agencies. In the process, the library gained visibility and credibility in the community.

In all this, it is important to have:

a/ priority order for programs, with dollar cost estimates attached.

b/ recognize cable use as a tool in serving/reaching people not reached before, disseminating, testing new ideas, in addition of regular library operations. Thus, another level of invoelvement is to have the library act as the local video access center, equipped and located at the library. There you could train community people, youth or adults, in video production, however modest, backing it with reference and information material on local issues. In the absence of local video groups this is seen as a legitimate area for library work in the Memphis-Shelby county library and information center. In the presence of local video groups, the District of Columbia Public Library works closely with them and avoids duplication of effort, while sharing resources and expertize.

Finally, regular library programming on cable implies the most commitment. As it is well known by now, the Natrona Co., Casper, Wyoming library deals with 2 library channels, one for visual reference service and the other for local events programming. Similarly, in Mobile, Alabama, each department of the Public Library is responsible for a weekly program, so that they provide up to 60 hours each week in shows put together at the cable operator's studio or elsewhere.

I have spoken too long, but let me conclude with this: I would not like to stand here and enumerate a laundry list of possible programs that a library might put together for cable showing. Based on acquaintance with your own community, familiarity with precedents you could find in publications suggested to you today in this bibliography, discussion and your own imagination, each one of you would do much better than I could in designing an exciting and useful format. I only hope that my talk with you today has suggested clearly enough that cable involvement of some form is worthwhile exploring. So let us now take some time and focus on your community here.

Discussion related to work in the Los Angeles area followed, along with statements by Mr. Speed of the L.A.P.L.